Ānanda, about the path or way of practice, should a dispute arise in the Saṅgha, this dispute would be for much detriment, much unhappiness of the many; for the disadvantage, the detriment, the suffering of gods and humans.

— Gotama Buddha, Sāmagāma Sutta (MN104.5)

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A Necessary Skill for Liberation

The Suttas define Sammā-samādhi (Right Concentration) on the Noble Eight-factored Path as the attainment of the four jhānas.

A Harmful Sidetrack

“That which can be most harmful to the meditator is absorption samādhi (jhāna)… We just get stuck on that happiness. This is a danger…”

— Ajahn Chah

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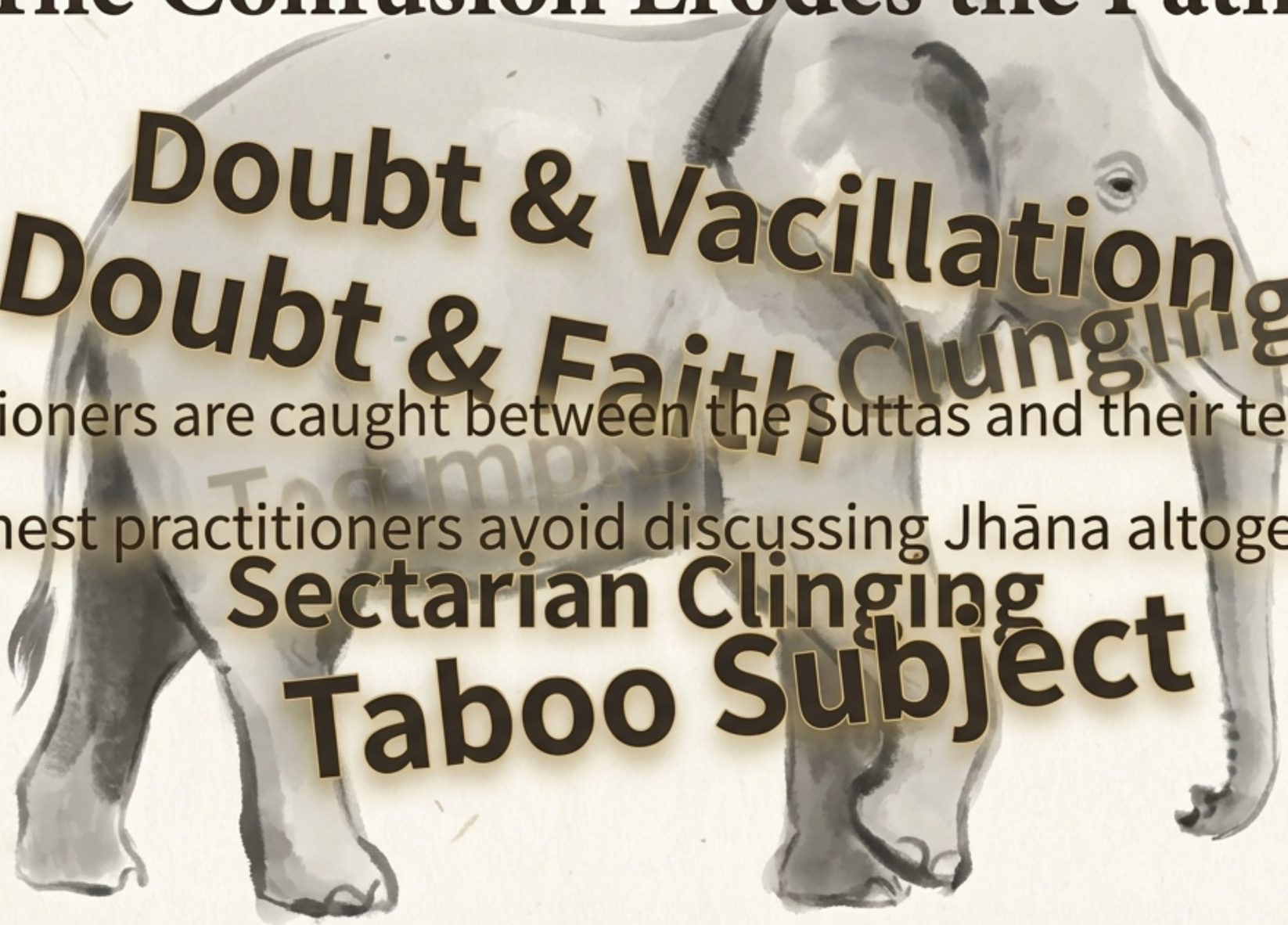
The Confusion Erodes the Path



Practitioners are caught between the Suttas and their teachers

Earnest practitioners avoid discussing Jhāna altogether

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The Investigation Begins: What Do the Suttas Say?

In the Suttas, Sammā-samādhi *is* the four jhānas.

This is the eighth factor of the Noble Path.

This definition is repeated consistently across the canon.

Citations: Vibhaṅga Sutta (SN45.8), SaccaVibhaṅga Sutta (MN141.31), MahāSatipaṭṭhāna Sutta (DN22.21).

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The Source of the Contradiction: The Visuddhimagga

Author: Āyasmā Buddhaghosa (5th Century CE, Sri Lanka).

Influence: A highly regarded, comprehensive manual in orthodox Theravāda.

The Key Concept: It introduces the *sukkha·vipassaka* (‘dry-insight worker’)—one who attains Awakening *without* previous experience of jhāna.

Conclusion: This text is the origin of the idea that Jhāna is optional for liberation.

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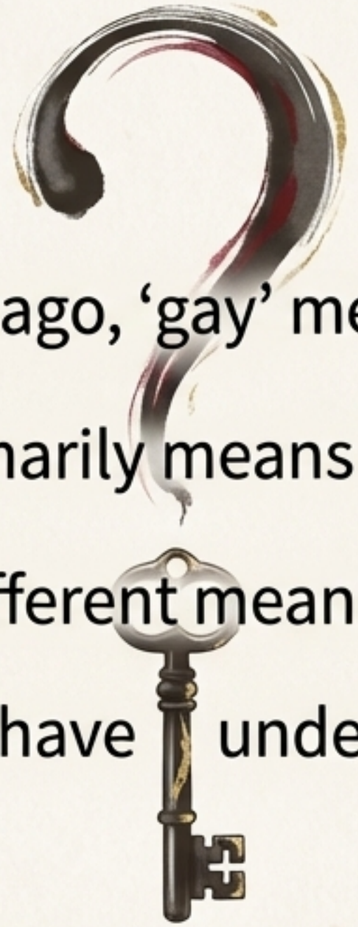
A Contradiction... or a Misunderstanding?



“Not too many decades ago, ‘gay’ meant happy or cheerful.”

‘Today, it primarily means homosexual.’

‘The same word. Two different meanings, separated by time.’

‘The same word ‘Jhāna’ have undergone a similar by time.’

Could the word ‘Jhāna’ have undergone a similar shift?

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The Elephant is an Illusion

The Suttas and the Visuddhimagga are not talking about the same thing.
They use the same word, ‘jhāna,’ to describe two different experiences.
Therefore, both are correct within their own context.

Sutta Jhāna IS necessary.
Visuddhimagga Jhāna IS NOT necessary.

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Comparing the Two Jhānas: Definition & The Body

SUTTAS	VISUDDHIMAGGA
Type of Concentration: Unification of mind. (The mind itself is gathered and unified).	**Type of Concentration:** One-pointed concentration. (Mind is fixed on a single object).
Body Awareness: Heightened experience of the body. (Insight into physical phenomena is possible).	**Body Awareness:** No experience of the physical body. (Awareness of the body and changing phenomena ceases).

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Comparing the Two Jhānas: Insight & The Sign (*Nimitta*)

SUTTAS	VISUDDHIMAGGA
Insight Practice: Can occur *within* jhāna. (The state is a basis for direct investigation).	**Insight Practice:** Must occur *outside* of jhāna. (One must exit the absorption to practice vipassanā).
Nimitta: A general term for ‘sign,’ ‘theme,’ or ‘basis.’ (Example: The four *satipaṭṭhānas* are a *nimitta* for samādhi).	**Nimitta:** A specific visual image arising in concentration, used as the object to attain absorption.

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Scholarly Corroboration

*"...what jhāna means in the commentaries is something quite different **from what it means in the Canon**... Awakening cannot occur without the attainment of jhāna in the **canonical sense**."*

— Ajahn Ṭhānissaro

"The tradition preserved in commentaries, especially in Buddhaghosa's work… seems to have developed a system of its own… anyone who intends to devote. . . his time and energy...will not fail, I believe, to detect the contrast."

— Ayodhya Prasad Pradhan (writing in 1986)

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Deeper Distinctions: Path, Nature & Attainability

SUTTAS	VISUDDHIMAGGA
Relation to the Path: Necessary. (An explicit factor of the Noble Eight-factored Path).	**Relation to the Path:** Optional. (Implied by the *sukkha·vipassaka*).
It is a kind of...: Mental Action. (A cultivated skill, something you *do*).	**It is a kind of...:** Mental State. (A destination you *arrive at*).
Attainability: Attainable. (Requires the first seven path-factors).	**Attainability:** Extremely difficult. (Optimistic ratio: 1 in 1,000,000 practitioners).

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Deeper Distinctions: Mindfulness & Practice Focus

SUTTAS	VISUDDHIMAGGA
Relation to Satipaṭṭhāna**:** This leads to the jhānas. (Mindfulness practice is the basis for samādhi; “From proper mindfulness, proper samādhi originates” - AN10.103).	**Relation to** Satipaṭṭhāna**:** Mutually exclusive practices. (One does not practice mindfulness of body/feelings while in absorption).
Most Important: The act of meditation. (The cultivation of skillful qualities).	**Most Important:** The object of meditation. (Sustained focus on the nimitta is paramount).

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Deeper Distinctions: The Inner Experience

SUTTAS

***Vitakka* & *Vicāra*: Thinking & Considering.** (Directed thought and evaluation are present in the first jhāna).

Type of Joy (*Pīti*): Peaceful, delightful, subtle. (Born of seclusion and skillful qualities).

VISUDDHIMAGGA

***Vitakka* & *Vicāra*: Initial & Sustained Application.** (Applying and keeping the mind fixed on the object).

Type of Joy (*Pīti*): Thrilling, rapturous, elating. (Described as 'delight in attaining the desired object').

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So, Were the Masters Wrong?

No. Their warnings were perfectly correct.

They were cautioning against the **Visuddhimagga-style absorption jhāna.**

- **Sayadaw U Tejaniya:** ‘You cannot use *absorption concentration for vipassanā*.’ (Correct)
- **Master Sheng Yen:** Ch’an practice ‘*is not for you to enter samādhi* (get into an absorbed state).’ (Correct for his context)
- **Ajahn Chah:** Warned against getting ‘*stuck on the happiness*’ of ‘*absorption samādhi*.’ (Correct)

Their advice aligns with the Suttas’ path of integrated insight.

Ajahn Chah

Sayadaw U Tejaniya

Master Sheng Yen

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The Reconciled View: A Skill vs. A State

SUTTA JHĀNA
The Necessary Skill

- A dynamic mental **action**.
- Integrated with mindfulness & insight.
- The engine of the Noble Path.

VISUDDHIMAGGA JHĀNA
The Optional State

- A deep mental **absorption**.
- Separate from insight practice.
- A specialized, powerful state of calm.

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